Service-Learning and the Dilemmas of Success

by Irving H. Buchen and Carl Fertman

SERVICE-LEARNING AS A METHODOLOGY and a movement has achieved a quantum jump in the last few years. Nationally, it has been given strong impetus by the commitment of Congress and President Clinton. A few years ago, Congress authorized significant start-up funds to make grants to states. A number of states, already extensively involved in service-learning, received substantial grants. Pennsylvania, our home base, for example, received sufficient funds to support, initially, 44 school and community programs throughout the state. Last year, there were 66 programs; and this year, it will go over 90. And Pennsylvania's growth of support is replicated in many states.

President Clinton has created his version of the Peace Corps, the AmeriCorps, which provides both stipends and college allowances to young men and women undertaking service. And there is Campus Compact, a separate service-learning program involving students and programs in higher education.

Service-learning also has benefitted from the leadership exercised by the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC), based in Minneapolis. NYLC has been a strong advocate and lobbyist for service-learning. It has received a substantial grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service to support the National Service-Learning Cooperative. It has also received funding from private foundations for the identification and nurturing of "generator schools" throughout the United States. It also sponsors an annual national conference. The last one was in Albuquerque; the next is scheduled for Philadelphia in the spring of 1995.

NSEE, as reported in this publication, has also been active in service-learning training, growing out of NSEE's grounding in a solid experiential learning paradigm. They have recently conducted leadership training of secondary school teachers who work in service-learning programs, and received a grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service to train all of CNCS's grantees.

Strong institutional state support also is in evidence. Maryland has mandated service-learning as a high school graduation requirement. An increasing number of school districts nationwide are requiring a minimum number of service hours and award academic credit. Equally striking is the capacity of service-learning to cut successfully across geographical and class lines; service-learning projects have been successful in elementary through higher education programs, in urban environments, in the suburbs, and in rural areas.

All of this has dramatically increased the number of service-learning projects throughout the United States and at a rapid pace. As a result of this relatively new approach to the community and the school, there are strong claims advanced by the disciples of service-learning. Service-learning is beginning to be seen as a panacea: it is one of a few successful methodology that works with at-risk kids in general and at-risk urban kids in particular; it can bring about major changes in teacher training and school reform; it attracts administrative and school board support because it goes a long way in silencing criticism

of education by tax payers, especially senior citizens; community agencies and organizations, short on dollars and volunteers, welcome students to fill the double gap; and finally, parents hail the ethic of community service being integrated into the curriculum of their offspring, an age group typically viewed as being self-centered.

If all the indicators are so positive, what's the problem? Actually we see three problems:

■ Practitioners of service-learning can't really prove that service-learning is as good as its advocates claim. Anecdotal evidence is stronger than empirical data.

■ Even if the affective development claims could be substantiated, what about the learning half of the equation? What evidence do we have of cognitive gains? And how long-lasting are they?

■ As a movement, especially to hasten school reform, it is too secure, too inward-facing, not self-critical. It has not explored its limits, it has not examined or planned its future. Critics or skeptics have not been heard or listened to.

Let us expand on each of these dilemmas of success, although the last one will be folded into the first two.

The impact that service-learning has on students, especially those whose relationships to school have been tenuous, tends to be dramatic. Self-esteem receives a substantial infusion of confidence, attendance improves, positive attitudes toward school increase. When teachers are asked why this happens and what accounts for the turn-around in behavior and attitude, they really cannot offer any pedagogical or psychological explanation. Many repeat the basic formulaic response: "I can't believe it is the same kid." Actually, one of the most positive yields that emerges from this response is the change on the part of the teachers in the way they perceive and relate to the students. Suddenly, these young people break free of stereotype and emerge as those worth paying attention to and working with, a not unimportant yield from a system that regularly employs an unofficial but powerful tracking system.

Administrators in general have a stronger base from which to observe and describe the effects of service-learning on their institutions. We see three basic reasons for this. First, administrators are in charge of the aggregate. They are responsible for the environment of the school as a whole. And when they discover that attendance improves, tardiness declines, and behavior problems decrease, they tend to be right on top of that

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data, and further want to know what they can do to spread the gospel. Second, administrators reluctantly spend a great deal of time on discipline problems, and if service-learning can alter that situation dramatically so that they are free to exercise professional leadership, that commands their attention and respect. Finally, administrators are students of the system and know that whatever may work in one teacher's classroom has to become systemic if it is going to affect the learning in the school as a whole, especially in middle and high schools which are multi-departmental. Thus, administrators are more eager than teachers to know if service-learning works and whether it is a quick fix that won't last or something deserving of comprehensive support.

Interestingly, when students talk about the service-learning experience and why it has been so positive, their explanations, which are different from those of their teachers, are presented as sufficient or self-evident in themselves — not needing any more definition or elaboration than the description. Thus, the recurrent terms from students are that it is "fun," "not boring," "active," and "different"; and it is nice to be able to help people, to be needed, and to make a difference. Clearly, part of the problem is that students and teachers may not agree on what is important. When teachers hear that students are having fun and enjoying themselves, that can quickly become a basis for considering those activities suspect or trivial. But the real failure here is that the teachers may have difficulty devising meaningful and relevant ways for the students to discover and understand why they are changing or have changed; and why having fun and not being bored work to accomplish these happy affective ends. Unless some in-service support and opportunity for sharing are built into teachers' responsibilities, they don't have, for themselves, a sound experiential learning environment.

That failure, in turn, is based on the more fundamental limitation of teacher-training and in-service programs which do not provide exposure to the nature of experiential education and the significant body of theory (especially the writings of John Dewey) and research associated with experiential education. For example, aside from the interesting notion that fun may be a profound subject, Gary Philips (1984, p. 84) in his research found the following: we remember 10% of what we hear; 15% of what we see; 20% of what we hear and see; 60% of what we do; 80% of what we do with active reflection (teachers helping students understand what they are experiencing); and 90% of what we teach. Clearly, to jump from 20% to 60% through experiential education explains much. And when one adds that good service-learning programs involve reflection and may include activities whereby students teach or tutor other students, then we have hit the jackpot and 90%, and the gains seem more intelligible. Ironically, sensational affective gains have a way of obscuring the need to understand what is going on in the process of affective development and, equally as important, what more needs to be done by teachers to make the process more intelligible and usable to the students themselves. But the lack of opportunity for self-critical reflection by teachers encourages or may even require accepting the success without questioning its sources.

Documenting and evaluating the learning half of service-learning is even more problematic. The most serious omission is that the reflection component is frequently missing altogether or only casually rather than causally employed. The development goal of reflection is ultimately that of critical examination and critical thinking. The yield that Philips postulates requires a reflection process that is focused and rigorous. All too often, however, when reflection is used, it is often limited to a primitive and non-developmental process of journal writing. These deficiencies are tolerated by the temptation to settle for dramatic quick and surface success rather than long-term embedded improvement. Also, for too long, the major writers and researchers of service-learning not only have neglected to draw attention to these limitations, but have failed to offer correctives. A new significant corrective is a book by Harry Silcox (1993), focusing on reflection which should seriously advance the cause of deepening learning as part of service.

Another major sin of omission is the general lack of printed curriculum materials to stimulate the development of curriculum infusion models. Indeed, it is impossible to monitor, document, and evaluate cognitive gains when service-learning fails to engage the curriculum. But, as in the first dilemma, the issue goes deeper and serves again to reveal how advocates of service-learning do not reflect deeply on their own practice. (A newly published service-learning curriculum by the authors may provide such a rigorous stimulus in this area [Buchen and Fertman, 1994].)

Affective gains appear rapidly in experiential education. Cognitive gains are buried, more subterranean as it were, deeper, less available and accessible to short-term evaluations. The lack of longitudinal studies of service-learning is thus devastating; and there are only a few signs that this will be remedied. The chicken-and-egg problem — long term cognitive gains and the absence of longitudinal studies — is compounded by another weakness of service-learning theory: the recognition that if service-learning is to have academic substance and convey cognitive gains, it has to reflect a developmental pattern itself. Flushed with early and premature success, service-learning practitioners have not looked ahead to project that service-

learning is capable of deepening the relationship of students to their service experiences on the one hand and their learning experiences on the other. Specifically, the initial stages of service-learning tend to be those of exposure — a series of introductions to different ways of learning, to different relationships with adults, to different relationships with the community. But then academics take hold and the need to know drives the development pattern. Students working with senior citizens can become engaged in wanting to know more about the biology of aging, the psychology of aging, public policy with respect to the elder populations, etc. In other words, an initiated exposure, with careful guidance and stimulus by the teacher, can develop into a deeper, more internship-like relationship and may progress even further into a research relationship and field experience. But once again, that requires structure and the awareness on the part of the practitioners that service-learning is capable of a developmental pattern. Once that kind of cognitive future is defined, then the need for longitudinal range and studies will become more supportable and obvious.

But a problem that service-learning needs to be held blameless for is one which educators in general have failed to address, let alone solve. And that is the interface between experiential learning and academic learning. Essentially, we have the appearance of two separate and distinct worlds. The first is outward-facing, operates beyond the classroom, and is characterized by students finding that experiences are fun, relevant, stimulating, and humanizing. The other operates in the classroom, faces inward, and is characterized by students having experiences that are familiar, predictable, serious, and often only partially relevant. As educators we generally have failed to come up with the interface that enables us to join experiential learning and academic learning. And until we do, each half will pass itself off as the whole, when in fact the whole in this case can probably exceed the sum of its parts.

There are many other issues that, of course, need also to be addressed: the changing relationships between teachers and students in a service-learning experience; the development of an ethic of community service by students as citizens; the benefits to communities of comprehensive involvement of young people in service activities, to mention a few. But these are for another time. Here the critical issue is to challenge those associated with service-learning to address their own major pedagogical, research, and evaluation agendas. Specifically, *first* there is the basic need to be less self-serving, more self-critical, especially during a time of growing public recognition and funding; otherwise one may kill the goose that lays the golden egg by failing to indicate how golden the egg really is. *Second*, there needs to be a commitment to address the cognitive gains of service-learning and to develop the robust curriculum infusions and longitudinal studies to document those gains. *Finally*, and above all, there needs to be a comprehensive effort to examine and define the nature of experiential learning in such a way that it interfaces with that of academic learning and, of equal importance, describes how the process works the other way as well. Standard sources for satisfying these needs are research conducted by colleges of education and through doctoral dissertations. But while we wait for that to emerge, the call that will be hearkened above all will come from school administrators because the whole educational program and the school environment are their responsibilities and opportunities, and because they alone can marshal the energies of teachers and students to advance the causes of learning and of humanizing current and future generations.

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